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Kenya

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Trade Policies - Are they implicated in plant-disease spread

Report Categories:

Grain and Feed

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Report Highlights:
Scientists and researchers have mobilized to develop wheat varieties resistant to Ug99 wheat-stem rust, a fungal disease reportedly capable of completely devastating wheat crops wherever it is present. Government wheat policies can also be altered in an attempt at slowing the disease's spread. However, in Kenya, where the disease likely originated, the Government of Kenya (GOK) appears to be setting the stage through its agriculture-policy framework for continued, while inadvertent, spread of Ug99.

General Information:

Today, researchers and farmers in Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, Sudan, Yemen, Pakistan and Iran know first-hand the destructive effects of Kenya/Uganda-born Ug99. Scientists suggest that India will be the next wheat-growing country to wither Ug99's destructive effects. Longer-term, Ug99 will certainly increase the global cost of producing one of the most important food grains on earth, and may decrease world wheat production as well. Researchers are scrambling to develop Ug99-resistant wheat varieties, but their work will likely take years before resistant varieties can be developed.

According to an article written by Sharon Schmickle that appears in the Washington Post and the Pulitzer Center, "eighty percent of Asian and African wheat varieties are now susceptible, and so is barley, FAO experts said. Scientists named the new menace Ug99 for its discovery in Uganda in 1999. But they say it probably started earlier in Kenya, where more wheat is grown…Unlike common rust infestations, which reduce but do not wipe out yields, stem rust can

topple a whole field. "It can take everything," said Robert McIntosh, former director of Australia's rust-control program. "It is the most damaging of the rusts." http://www.pulitzercenter.org/openitem.cfm?id=1350

This virulent black-rust race disease continues to spread from Kenya with inadvertent assistance from the GOK, and while it may be too late to stop the spread of Ug99, the GOK can slow its progress and prevent its successor from evolving/mutating by implementing consumer and environment-friendly agricultural production and trade policies. Reportedly some Kenyan wheat farmers have at times experienced 80 percent crop loss to this virulent black-rust race, nonetheless they continue producing wheat and stem-rust spores, because the GOK wheat import policy imposes a 25 percent ad-valorem wheat import tariff that increases domestic wheat prices by more than the added production expenses related to producing wheat where the Ug99 stem rust thrives. And, the agronomic conditions in Kenya appear to favor the mutation/birth of yet unnamed and unknown wheat diseases if the GOK continues its production-distorting policies.

Many prominent Kenyan Government and non-government officials reportedly believe that Kenya, by the year 2030 or before, should produce all of the food (including wheat) and fiber consumed in Kenya. This notion/goal of growing all the food the population of Kenya consumes ignores the Ug99 problem, and other comparative environmental and economic disadvantages to growing wheat in Kenya. It also fails to serve Kenyan wheat-product consumers, who could benefit from lower prices if wheat producers in better-suited wheat producing regions of the world were granted tariff-free access to this market.

GOK agriculture-policy experts could seek policy alternatives to wheat production that might include sorghum, millet, cassava, etc., while "wheat efficient" producing regions could easily meet Kenyan consumer wheat demand. Kenyans consume nearly one million tons of wheat annually and domestic producers harvest only about one-quarter of the total. Considering that Kenyan wheat producers must begin spraying fungicides shortly after wheat's emergence to fight the ravages of Ug99, understanding that the applied fungicides don't kill the stem rust but merely keep it sufficiently in check during the wheat-grain development cycle to enable a harvest and that Kenya's rust-favorable climatic conditions and fungi-proliferating alternate host populations provide the perfect environment for Ug99 and future fungal diseases to flourish, it seems reasonable that the GOK consider reducing its economic and environmental footprint by eliminating its wheat production-distorting policies.

Eliminate this tariff-induced production distortion, and any other production policy distortions (please see KE9019), and local producers will likely reduce wheat production, diminishing the Ug99 wind-born threat from this region. Fail to eliminate the production-distorting policy and local producers will likely continue to inadvertently propagate Ug99 and possibly, future, not-yet-mutated/discovered wheat diseases.